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ABSTRACT

Although there is much support for the nongraded concept of schooling, it becomes difficult to identify the principles underlying nongradedness. In particular, many writers on the topic have failed to support their positions with an explication of basic philosophic assumptions. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to tender a philosophic foundation extrapolated from various authors' positions. Initially, the nature of the learner is discussed. Using this discussion as a benchmark, ideas about teaching, curriculum, and instructional methods are presented. (Author/DN)

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NONGRADEDNESS: SUPPORTING THEORY TO GUIDE PRACTICE

by

Jerry Patterson

According to a recent Gallup survey, 71 percent of the public and 87 percent of the educators approve of the nongraded school concept.[1] "Approval of this idea is so high throughout the nation that the movement toward nongraded schools will undoubtedly accelerate over the next decade."[2]

On the other hand, few people seem to know what a truly nongraded school should look like. As I have indicated in a previous article, the vague message of nongradedness stems primarily from the lack of an articulated theoretical basis to guide practice.[3] In particular, many writers on the topic have failed to support their positions with an explication of basic

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philosophic assumptions. Yet as I have reviewed the major writings on nongrading, it has become evident that several important philosophic premises permeate the writings, even though a philosophic foundation has never been formally articulated.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to tender a set of philosophic assumptions extrapolated from various authors' positions. Initially, the nature of the learner is discussed. Then, using this discussion as a benchmark, ideas about teaching, curriculum, and instructional methods are presented.

Nature of the Learner

As a major assumption, defenders of a nongraded philosophy assert that each learner brings to the classroom a unique combination of needs, interests, and abilities.[4] Thus, the pupil in a nongraded environment, because he is endowed with a combination of traits distinct from others, contributes an ingredient to the classroom which is unmatched by other students.

Freedom to choose a course of action is another description of the nature of the learner in a nongraded program. As Purdom expressed the idea: "Ensuring the freedom for the learner to make choices concerning the objectives of his program is one of the most vital aspects of implementation of the

nongraded school."[5]

Accepting the ideas that each learner possesses distinctive characteristics and that he has the freedom of choice for molding these traits as he decides his educational future, to what ends do most learners aspire? In the views of writers on the subject of nongrading, the student is motivated to develop his maximum potential. One researcher asserted that maximum learning potential . . "means that a student has a capacity for learning at an efficiency rate of near 100 percent."[6] Extrapolating from the nongraded philosophy, the learner, given freedom of choice tempered with sound advisement, will eventaully select those educational experiences and instructional procedures which permit him to learn most efficiently. Haldi supported this contention:

> Since his maximum learning potential has not been determined for him but rather <u>by</u> him through his own choices, he is, in essence, prepared to achieve what he feels and thinks he ought rather than what others tell him to do. Others may help him visualize advantageous learning strategies, but as long as he has exercised positive free action in the determination of his maximum learning potential, he is responsible for achieving up to maximum learning potential.[7]

The preceding discussion has centered on the nature of the learner as interpreted from the writings

on the philosophy of nongrading. To summarize the salient points, each learner in a nongraded classroom:

1. Possesses a unique combination of needs, interests, abilities, and other traits which distinguishes him from other pupils.
2. Is free to choose his educational program from available alternatives.
3. Is intrinsically motivated to develop his maximum learning potential.

Nature of the Teacher

Once the nature of the learner in a nongraded classroom has been described, the teacher in a nongraded school assumes a stature different from the teacher in a graded system. In a nongraded setting the teacher is a facilitator in the educational process; he is not the disseminator of packaged knowledge. Instead, the instructor assists the student in selecting and completing educational experiences. To accomplish this assignment, according to Haldi, the teacher should appear to the student as a person who can be trusted to provide direction in the school program.[8]

To aid in providing sensible direction, the instructor needs to be a diagnostician and, at the same time, a counselor. This first obligation requires skills which permit the teacher to diagnose a student's

educational needs based on the pupil's declared objectives. Once the needs have been determined, the teacher has the responsibility to make the student aware of his needs as they relate to his goals. Rollins referred to this obligation as the counseling function of a teacher.

> Counseling involves a close personal relationship and generally the confrontation between teacher and pupil or pupils has a definite purpose. The teacher functioning as counselor serves as a harmonizing influence in the classroom. What is true here is that the teacher functioning as a counselor encourages a teaching-learning situation where the teacher helps the pupil to use content to achieve sound educational purposes rather than a situation in which the pupil is used by the teacher as a receptacle for content.[9]

As implied above, the diagnosing-counseling process does not necessarily require a student with a major personal problem. The proponent of a philosophy of nongrading postulates that the continuous interaction between teacher and pupil is, to some degree, a diagnosing-counseling activity. At no point, however, does the teacher utilize this process to force a particular course of action by the pupil; each student remains ultimate decision-maker concerning his educational program.

To state a final assumption, the teacher in a nongraded program is a person who is flexible in his approach to the teaching-learning act. In order to

provide educational experiences which foster the uniqueness of each individual, an instructor should be able to teach in a variety of ways. This requirement conflicts with the notion that each teacher should use a method which is most conducive to his personality. To the contrary, the instructor needs a repertoire of procedures which reaches a wide range of learning styles.

To summarize, the philosophy supporting the nongraded idea states that the teacher is:

1. A facilitator in the learning process.
2. A diagnostician. He is skilled in detecting weaknesses in the student's educational program based on the student's personally determined objectives.
3. A learning counselor. The teacher assists the pupil in making sound educational decisions.
4. Flexible in his ability to accommodate individual differences. He can adapt his teaching style to the requirements of diverse learning patterns.

Nature of the Curriculum

An understanding of the nature of curriculum is important in order to implement the notion of nongrading. Organizational change alone results in a superficial switch to nongrading. Unless corresponding curricular and instructional changes accompany organizational rearrangement, practical application of the nongraded concept may not be consistent with the philosophical orientation. Following, therefore, is

a discussion of the curriculum as interpreted from the writings on nongraded philosophy.

According to Rollins, the nongraded curriculum is " . . . simply stated, what is to be taught on purpose. What children learn accidentally and incidentally may be important, but there is little reason for schools to accept credit, or blame, for these things."[10] Rollins does not mean by this statement that all curriculum is pre-planned and unchangeable. In fact, in order to provide for individual differences and to accommodate the range of choices expressed by students, the curriculum needs to be flexible. Rollins does mean, however, that changes should be intentional. Hence, some structure within the curricular framework is important.

In a nongraded school, this curriculum structure should focus on the major concepts and modes of inquiry of a discipline. According to Purdom:

> This design or pattern in no way prescribes specific fields of study or suggests certain knowledge as being valuable for all students. Instead the proposition identifies the type of curricular design most compatible with what is known about individual differences and the nature of knowledge. Two learners interested in two different subject fields might never develop the same concepts or modes of inquiry because of their different interests; but, through time, each would be progressing at his own rate toward broad understanding of structural concepts and modes of inquiry of the discipline he is exploring.[11]

Under this arrangement, curriculum would be longitudinal with the major ideas placed in sequence according to the structure of a discipline.[12] Using the major concepts as a basis for learning, students may proceed in a variety of dimensions depending on their particular needs, abilities and interests.

Based on the philosophical assumptions underlying nongradedness, no specific courses for students should be required. If one accepts the notion that each pupil is ultimate decision-maker in his educational program, no external source should impose a curricular offering on the student. While the teacher, functioning as diagnostician-counselor, may detect weaknesses in certain needed skills and may identify appropriate instructional remedies, the instructor should serve only to help the pupil realize the importance of particular curricular choices. In no case should the teacher usurp the student's perogative to choose an alternative course of action.

Several significant points have been made about the nature of the curriculum as viewed by a defender of nongraded philosophy. To review, the curriculum:

1. Is what is taught on purpose.
2. Is organized around the major concepts and modes of inquiry of the discipline.

3. Does not mandate specific courses for any given student.

Nature of the Instructional Method

A fourth philosophical consideration centers on the nature of the instructional methods used in a nongraded program. As evidenced by previous propositions regarding the learner, teacher, and curriculum, a persistent theme of nongradedness is that the school should recognize and develop maximum learning potential according to the uniqueness of each individual. Consequently, the instructional methods should be geared to the individual. Lewis summarized this position: "The basic guiding principle behind the nongraded concept is individualization of instruction. Any efficacious ways and means adopted by education to individualize instruction serves to foster the goals of the nongraded philosophy."[13] The writer qualified his remarks by adding:

> A program which provides for individualization of instruction is not truly a nongraded program unless humanism is an integral part of the program . . . In education, it means seeing and treating students as individuals each with a different personality, needs, interests, and abilities.[14]

At this point, an interpretation of "individualization" should be offered. Many educators believe that the mentioned term refers to an instructional process of learning in isolation. In the opinion

of most writers on nongrading, this interpretation is unacceptable. Instead, individualizing instruction means providing instruction at a rate and level commensurate with the student's abilities. This process can occur in large groups, small discussion groups, or in independent projects. The important point is that the instruction is designed for the student rather than for an entire class.[15]

Given the assumptions that each student continually strives to develop his maximum potential and that he is final authority on decisions about his educational program, the instructional methods employed in a nongraded school should be structured in a manner consistent with the above points. Thus, a teaching technique should be designed to allow the pupil to pursue those activities which he perceives will enhance personal development. Although Rollins demonstrated that some instructional methods were more consistent with the philosophical orientation to nongrading than others, e. g., independent activity projects, each pupil should select the teaching technique which he perceives will maximally develop his potential. Accepting this position a variety of instructional methods should be available to

facilitate the personal development of each student.

Based on the preceding discussion, the instructional methods utilized in a nongraded classroom are consistent with the theory of nongrading if they:

1. Provide individualized instruction. This belief means that each student is working at his own level in each subject area, at his own rate, with the materials he prefers, and in a manner he chooses.

2. Facilitate the personal development of each student according to his perception of which methods maximize learning potential.

Summary

All signs indicate that a nongraded form of education continues to increase in popularity. At the same time, educators have devoted little attention to the theoretical constructs underlying nongradedness. In the words of one writer: "While well-intended, the message of the nongraded school is at best vague and its translation into practice leaves much to be desired."[16] The intent of the foregoing analysis was to partially alleviate this problem by establishing a cogent set of philosophic assumptions which provides educators with guidelines for implementing the nongraded concept of schooling.

1. George H. Gallup, "The Fourth Annual Gallup Poll Of Attitudes Toward Education," Phi Delta Kappan 54 (1972): 39.

2. Ibid., p. 39.

3. Jerry L. Patterson, "Nongradedness: Why has it eluded the high schools?" The Clearing House 47 (1973): 392-95.

4. James Lewis, Jr.. A Contemporary Approach to Nongraded Education (West Nyack, New York: Parker Publishing Co., Inc., 1969).

5. Daniel M. Purdom, Exploring the Nongraded School (Dayton: IDEA, 1970).

6. T. C. Haldi, "Freedom, Responsibility and the Nongraded School" (Unpublished Doctor's dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1969), p. 42.

7. Ibid., pp. 43-44.

8. Ibid., p. 74.

9. Sidney P. Rollins, Developing Nongraded Schools (Itasca, Ill.: F. E. Peacock Publishers, Inc. 1968).

10. Ibid., p. 76.

11. Purdom, op cit., p. 21.

12. Rollins, op cit., p. 27.

13. Lewis, op cit., p. 21.

14. Lewis, op cit., p. 21.

15. Marilyn Laskey, "Individualize? How?" (Ft. Lauderdale, Fla: Nova High School, no date), p. 4. (mimeographed).

16. William P. McLoughlin, "Individualization of Instruction vs. Nongrading," Phi Delta Kappan 53 (1972): 378.